

Not too late yet by HoshisamaValmor

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Summary: It had never been about replacing Sara. It was about knowing El knew what it felt like to be loved that much.

Not too late yet

Author's Note: My old The Last of Us fanfic was recently brought back to mind, but I didn't like to re-read it, so I thought I should try a new version and see how it'd turn out. Hopper and El's dynamic felt rather befitting. The name of Jim and Joel's lost child is even the same!

And I only noticed it as I posted it, but this was even written on the same damn day as the other fic, 2 years later! O_O Posted one day later, but I wrote this on September 25.

Title is a parallel to that TLoU fic title, 'Not a burden'. Written to the beautiful song '*As Hope Welcomes Death*' by Gone in April.

Disclaimer: Don't own Stranger Things.

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It wasn't about her growing up. Of course Jim knew it would happen. It just happened too fast.

She was making friends. She had a booyfriend now. Her speaking had improved to the point of almost flawlessly matching that of any kid her age. He had seen her change the channel when a show she enjoyed watching just the year prior was airing.

"You don't like it anymore?"

El shrugged. "I like others."

It was just happening so fast, and when he took note of those little things, those small changes that weren't small at all, he felt like he had missed something important, something irreplaceable, forever.

Yes, he had. He had missed El's entire early childhood. Those moments that would never return, that wouldn't allow him to be part of them, to give him the time to guide her and teach her through.

Things he wished he could have witnessed and feel the pride and joy that he once felt as a parent, before it was all ripped away so fast.

It had never been about replacing Sara. Children are not replaceable like some piece of clothes. It was about giving... trying to give all that love and all that care and protection to someone who needed it and deserved it. Sara was loved, she was loved so, so much, so damn much...

Jim turned his back and lowered his gaze, even though El was focused on the tv screen. He didn't want her to see him sad, he didn't want to hurt or confuse her like that. But the mere memory brought back those tears he thought had long since dried or frozen and instead he had to keep fighting them even now.

It was never about replacing Sara. It was about knowing El knew what it felt like to be loved that much. And to be there with her to see it. Jim wanted to have that time with her, but so much was already gone and it was vanishing and slipping through his fingers and it hurt. She was just growing up and he feared he had not been able to give her that after all, at the important time he should have.

"It's starting!" Jim turned around to see El hop off the sofa. "*Miami Vice* is starting."

He looked at the commercials that were still airing and then down at his wristwatch.

"It's still ten minutes to start."

The numbers flew from his sight when El pulled him by the hand towards the kitchen.

"I know, but can we make some eggos? Please? I know it's not breakfast, but they taste so good when we watch *Miami Vice*."

"We've never eaten eggos while watching *Miami Vice*," Jim pointed out.

"Then let's see if I'm right. Let me show you."

Jim watched as she piled layers of sugar and coatings and toppings

into two mountains of delicious calories which he perfected with two pieces of chocolate on top, so carefully and artistically placed it made El laugh. They barely managed to bring the plates to the sofa without incidents. *Miami Vice* started precisely when they had managed to sit down unscathed, and they dug into their respective towers while watching the episode.

"You're right, kid. These are amazing."

El smiled, mouth full of eggos and caramel topping smudging her lips. Jim smiled too and took another huge bite, making his cheeks bloat so much it forced a strangled laugh out of El.

"Don't eat it like that."

"Why not? It tastes amazing. And you do the same thing."

El swallowed down her own mouthful of eggos with difficulty because of how hard she was fighting laughter.

"No, I don't. My face doesn't make that."

"Have no illusions, you look like a very round squirrel, kid."

El bumped her hand on his shoulder playfully and returned to her eggos, stuffing her mouth and making herself look precisely like a squirrel hiding acorns in her cheeks. They shared their best looks and struggled not to choke on laughs before they finally returned to watch the episode.

Maybe he hadn't lost it at all. Maybe it wasn't too late yet.

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the end

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Author's Note: Thank you for reading, feedback is appreciated.